

Spring 5-31-1998

Response to McFague

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Recommended Citation

Ureta, Anjie Blardony (1998) "Response to McFague," *Macalester International*: Vol. 6, Article 14.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol6/iss1/14>

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Response

Anjie Blardony Ureta

In a world swept away by unbridled liberal, individualistic, and materialistic options offered by secular thinking, it is disarming to hear a voice like that of Sallie McFague — one that cries out from the wilderness of capitalistic chaos: “Repent, and save your soul!” But as with the prophets of old, Dr. McFague’s voice is a lonely one. There are many good citizens on this planet who are fighting to sustain Mother Nature, but few of them venture to do so with the pious reflection of a theologian.

Rationality serves as the basic motivation for environmentalism. With global resources overstressed by pollution and depletion, humankind’s options have been reduced to sustainability or self-destruction. Environmental warriors march on their crusade to “save the Earth” primarily because it has become an imperative for human survival.

This is not to say that self-preservation is a less worthy cause than a more abstract spiritual impetus. They are merely different. In her thought-provoking essay, Dr. McFague poses the challenge, from a Christian perspective, of going one step beyond a compelling need — that of fostering “the will to change.”

Dr. McFague emphasizes that the will to change is a critical step toward achieving Christian spirituality: loving God and neighbor because of who they are and not as a means to our ends. She has courageously singled out love — something not usually associated with science or logic — as the key to a harmonious interplay of nature and people in the era of globalization. By doing so, she has opened herself to secular censure: how can “love” defuse the ecological time bomb?

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One cannot be ambivalent about Dr. McFague’s work because she is quick to set the parameters of who she is as well as those of her paper. Describing herself as a “White, Western, feminist, Christian theologian,” she singles out the problem of climate change because it reflects not only the deterioration of nature but also the ever-widening gap between the First and Third Worlds. These descriptions of self also define her paper’s limitations: it unfolds as a linear journey along a

fixed and narrow route. Dr. McFague stubbornly keeps herself on track with one issue (climate change) and one perspective (Christianity), which is understandable—except that it may appear confining to minds that like to surf freely over waves of boundless possibilities.

Why discuss environmental degradation solely from the viewpoint of Christian theology? Although it is still one of the world's most influential religions, Christianity has no monopoly on spirituality. Nor has it been known to vigorously preach the preservation of nature. Dr. McFague admits that recognizing and appreciating nature for what it is and not for what it offers is “not... esoteric, rare, or limited to Christians.” That is an understatement because environmental protection does not appear to be a compelling dogma of Christianity.

However, it is precisely this single-minded adherence to one issue and one perspective that serves as the anchor of Dr. McFague's work, transforming what could have been a liability into her essay's greatest strength: *humility*. By refraining from generalities, Dr. McFague rejects any pretense of omniscience—a trap many scholars fall into in their eagerness to flaunt their expertise.

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The history of civilization is replete with sordid tales of exploitation and colonization—twin scourges bequeathed by the Western world. If the subject leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, it is because I am the product of a nation still groping for a sense of self, for an identity crushed beneath the rubble of 350 years spent inside a convent and another half a century squandered in Hollywood.

The Philippines was a land of sultans and freemen long before any *conquistador* dreamed of casting his sail eastward. Our islands were inhabited by God-fearing people who recognized the primordial link between humans and nature. Tribal Filipinos believe to this day that every creature on land, in the air, or under the sea has a guardian spirit (*diwata*) watching over it, assigned by the blessings of the Almighty One, *Bathala*.

All primeval religions tell us that humans were tasked by God to be the stewards of nature, but colonization changed that view of divine stewardship. White men, driven by avarice, appropriated continents by the sword and the cross. For my ancestors—and for the indigenous tribes that composed the vanquished peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—conversion to the colonial cross meant being crucified on it.

If they had known what the specter of galleons looming over the horizon would bring to them and countless generations thereafter, they would have fallen on their knees and prayed, "Jesus, protect us from your followers!"

Why is looking to our colonial past important in understanding the premise of Dr. McFague's essay? Because the "arrogant eye" — the Western eye — is rooted in the colonial gaze. Dr. McFague brilliantly describes such a posture, and how it reduces everything it sees into either "human resources" or "natural resources" — commodities that are ripe for the picking and exist solely for the pleasure of whomever wields the bigger stick.

True, the Western elite still operates in much the same way as did its forefathers during the bloody era of conquest — constantly preying on hapless, underdeveloped communities, still unwilling to clean up the mess they have caused. The only difference is that these days, conversion to Christianity has given way to conversion to consumerism — a far more subtle but equally deadly lure. This is because Christianity emphasized holiness through self-denial, while consumerism's battle cry is bliss through self-indulgence. The latter has proven to be a far more effective tool for subjugation.

To its credit, the Western world has dared to improve on nature, always reaching out for what can be better, higher, faster. It has used its skills to develop new ways to overcome some earthly perils, including disease and starvation. Yet, rapid development in science and technology carries the seeds of its own destruction: pollution, poisonous industrial discharges, alarming levels of radiation, and the deterioration of atmospheric conditions, to name a few. Human beings have become ecological hostages. We have turned nature into our enemy; now nature is fighting back.

Nations may be divided by territorial boundaries, but these invisible lines cannot isolate or protect any country from an ecological breakdown. Scientists warn us that if we do nothing to curb global warming, icebergs will melt and the sea level will rise by as much as four feet by the first half of the twenty-first century. When that happens, the devastation will not discriminate between rich and poor nations.

Dr. McFague blames the Western world for being the purveyor of consumerism, which, in turn, results in the wanton abuse of natural resources. Statistics on the runaway consumption of the world's wealthiest countries support Dr. McFague's contentions. Recent stud-

ies show that a consumer in a developed country uses up to three times as much fresh water, ten times as much wood, and fourteen times as much paper as someone from a developing nation. Similarly, an average person in North America consumes twenty times as much energy as someone in India or China, and up to seventy times more than someone living in Bangladesh.¹ Does this mean that the average human being in the First World needs more food, water, or fuel in order to survive than his Third World counterpart? No. The use of resources at such a magnitude is not in order to live, but in order to *live well*.

Living well, according to the Western model of high consumption, is to live in abundance, to explore and exploit whatever is available for one's physical pleasure and convenience. Here, I deviate slightly from Dr. McFague, who pinned the blame solely on the First World. Equally culpable are the Third World elite. Large portions of the developing world are becoming environmental catastrophes simply because its leaders have succumbed to the global pressure of "catching up with development." Wealthy industrial nations remain the "image of the future" for poor countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America — many of which have inherited the consumerist doctrine of their Western models, and perhaps even their excesses. In many instances, policymakers in developing countries cross the thin line between progression and regression in their desire to keep their footing in the global market. Many emerging economies are willing to embrace industrialization even before they are prepared to address such basic concerns as waste disposal, urban congestion, protection of watersheds, or the entry of consumer products that are hazardous to the health of people and the environment.

Just as they devour most of the world's natural resources, industrialized nations also generate 90 percent of the world's hazardous waste. Disposing of these toxic substances properly can be very expensive, so big businesses circumvent environmental laws in developing countries and use them as convenient dumping grounds. As government agencies fail to monitor and intercept them, these waste exports go through legal channels in the guise of recycling.

In 1994, Greenpeace activists visited the Philippines to investigate reports that the country was being used as a dumping ground for hazardous materials. Records from the Bureau of Customs show that in the first quarter of that year alone, Filipino recycling companies had imported 1,000 metric tons of plastic waste, 70 metric tons of old lead

batteries, and 65 metric tons of toxic computer scraps. This, despite the Toxic Substance and Hazardous Nuclear Wastes Control Act of 1990, which prohibits the entry — even in transit — and disposal of hazardous wastes into Philippine territorial limits.

At the second meeting of parties to the Basel Convention in 1994, a ban was imposed on the export of all toxic waste, putting an end to the importation of recyclable hazardous wastes. Its total implementation is expected to take effect by December 31, 1997. Of the 103 less-industrialized countries who have adopted this ban, the Philippines was the only Asian signatory. What about the other Asian dumping grounds? Between 1990 and 1993, more than 5 million tons of hazardous substances were shipped to twelve Asian countries. Are governments aware of the menace their citizens face in exchange for the revenues they collect for importing toxic waste?

As for materials that could really be recycled, some studies have shown that up to 40 percent of imported plastic by-products are either contaminated or of such low quality that they end up as hazardous waste in the importing countries anyway. This is yet another clever trick pulled by the “haves” on the “have-nots” who cannot — and often, who refuse to — see the perils of chasing development on an empty stomach.

Apology is not to be expected, for the bandleaders of consumerism actually believe they are doing something virtuous. That they are upgrading the lifestyles of people by introducing them to the wonders of modern conveniences. They are, ironically, filling a need in what they consider to be deprived societies—creating a need where there is none.

Western domination still exists, but we no longer call it colonization. Instead, First World intervention now wields its control through a package called foreign investment. In most instances, that means moving their operations to countries where labor is cheap and environmental laws ineffective. Thus, we hear stories of how pupils from a small village in Thailand wear gas masks to school as protection against hazardous fumes from a nearby factory; of how a major spill of copper mine tailings from a foreign-based company lethally polluted a once-bountiful river in the Philippine province of Marinduque; or of how the increased quarrying for building materials has exposed Indonesians to erosions, landslides, and the recent forest fires that have fouled the air in neighboring Southeast Asian countries.

It is the misfortune of many Third World countries that they mistakenly interpret the conquering gaze of the arrogant eye for solicitous

attention. But the guilt is shared. Many of us lust after rapid industrialization in the name of development — only to discover its corrosive downside.

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I was struck by Dr. McFague's use of a "poor woman of color" from the Third World as a barometer for measuring the health of both humanity and nature. She is, as Dr. McFague explains, the representative human being of the twenty-first century and, therefore, is the neighbor most deserving of our compassion. To save both her and nature, Dr. McFague calls for a shift from consumerism to what she calls a "new concept of abundance"—a reassessment of what the good life *really* is.

Her musings on Christian spirituality and the willingness to change come to the fore when she defines the "loving eye" as the very eye of God—an eye that appreciates the other as being integral to one's self and respects the world around it for what it is rather than for what it's worth.

Dr. McFague mentions her concept of the "kindom of God" but, unfortunately, does not expound on it. This concept was previously described by Dr. McFague at a World Council of Churches conference where she said that Christians should consider the entire earth as the household of God—the kindom of God—which contains all His creatures, members of one divine family. Stewardship of this household has been entrusted to humans, not as privilege, but as responsibility. As Dr. McFague warns, we are not God's darlings but rather His partners in making sure that His house rules are being followed.

Dr. McFague presents us with another conversion—a conversion to love. "Christians," she implores, "need a mind-shift, a heart-shift, to the earth and the well-being of all its creatures, human and non-human."² Realizing that the fate of the planet lies in their hands, she asks First World industrialists and their cohorts — the Third World elite — to limit their consumerist lifestyle so that others may live. Seen from another perspective, this clarion call reminds me of Martin Luther King's warning, that if we do not learn to live as brothers and sisters, we should be prepared to suffer as fools.

At this point, I again present the challenge posed by Dr. McFague: Can Christianity help us imagine a notion of the abundant life that is not built upon a high-energy consumer economy, the same economy

that underlies climate change? Perhaps. But will policymakers and businessmen buy the idea? Maybe not.

Although endlessly berated as a polluting and greedy monster, industry is still responsible for producing most of the goods, services, and wealth that continue to make human progress possible. Consequently, it cannot be denied that if global living standards are to keep up with population growth, then industry must also increase its output beyond the present levels.³ Given Dr. McFague's premise, big businesses are expected to shift their gaze from the company balance sheet to the global balance sheet for the common good. But even if they are willing to do so, are they really able?

Those who oil the wheels of progress are aware of the pressing need for environmental protection. In fact, most of them may be inclined toward positive action. But, alas, the spirit is oftentimes willing but the flesh is weak—too weak to resist the lure of profit, too weak to sacrifice the comfortable lifestyle it has grown accustomed to. Truly, as Christ Himself explicitly pointed out, "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."⁴

I agree with Dr. McFague that the Christian faith *could* serve as a basis for a change of heart and action, but it is a possibility I do not expect to be realized soon—at least not in a human universe that is gripped by denial. Instead of encouraging a more measured consumption and investing in cleaner production, industries all over the world pour their money into advertising, which promotes the insatiable desire for a status-symbol lifestyle—often at the expense of our limited resources.

Because the affluent West is not willing to drastically change its destructive ways in an effort to arrest the environmental concerns of this planet, it influences the rest of us to think that the problems don't exist. The tragedy is that we actually believe it.

Notes

1. PANOS media briefing no. 24 (June 1997).
2. Sallie McFague, "A Theological Reflection on Climate Change" (paper presented at the World Council of Churches Consultation of Climate Change and Sustainable Communities, 1996).
3. PANOS media briefing no. 24 (June 1997).
4. Luke 18:25.